

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Dominique Wilson, *The Yellow Papers* (Transit Lounge, 2014)

Everybody wants to feel like they belong somewhere, and for most people 'home' is where they belong, wherever that might be. But what happens when you're forced to leave your home and find your place in a new, very different world to the one you have known? Dominique Wilson was born in Algiers to French parents, but civil war forced her and her family to flee to Australia. It was these early experiences of war and displacement that inspired Wilson to write her debut novel, *The Yellow Papers*.

The novel opens in China in 1872. The country is still coming to terms with its defeat in the two opium wars, and the imperial government has opted to send a group of gifted young boys to be educated in America and later, as adults, to bring the secrets of the west back to China. Chen Mu is one of these boys.

Though initially scared to leave his village and his mother, and angry about being sent to live amongst 'the barbarians', Chen Mu adapts to life in America more readily than he had anticipated. At seventeen, an educated and respectful teenager, he feels 'more American than Chinese'.

When he develops a passion for botany, he leaves his school without permission to seek out the Venus flytrap and for the first time encounters violent prejudice. Too afraid to seek help in America, and too ashamed to return to China, an injured and terrified Chen Mu stows away aboard a cargo ship bound for Australia. The ship is several days into the journey before he is discovered, delirious with illness and injury, and he is locked below deck to tend to his wounds.

In Australia Chen Mu begins work as a gardener for a wealthy pastoralist. He meets Edward Billings, his employer's young grandson, and he captivates the young boy with tales of exotic China. Edward's deep fascination with China shapes his entire life, eventually leading him to Shanghai after he becomes an expert in Chinese antiquities. Edward feels more at home in Shanghai than he does anywhere in Australia, and he falls in love with Ming Li, the beautiful wife of a wealthy Cantonese businessman. Though she returns his love, war separates Edward and Ming Li time and again, and each time they must make sacrifices and fight to be reunited. Meanwhile, in Australia, facing hatred and racism, Chen Mu falls in love with an Indian woman.

While the subject matter is powerful, Wilson does the story and its readers a disservice by distancing us from her characters. There are many opportunities to press upon readers the horrors of war and to force us, just for a moment, to feel a fragment of the pain that her characters must feel. But none of these opportunities is truly exploited. The writing, though brilliant and engaging, is reserved. The agony of the characters is treated with a detachment that suggests overwhelming and unjustifiable suffering is merely a part of life. It certainly is for her characters, and for the thousands of child prostitutes and the victims of war, dying in the streets of cholera or starvation, who are nothing more than a backdrop to the story.

In one instance Ming Li sees a toddler sitting in filth and prodding a 'pile of rags', trying to get a reaction from it. Ming Li passes by without thought or comment. Such was Ming Li's indifference that it wasn't until my second reading of the novel that I realised the unresponsive 'pile of rags' was the child's dead mother.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of this book is the painstaking research that must have gone into it, and the resulting depth of detail, particularly from an author who, until *The Yellow Papers*, had only published short stories. The time line of the novel stretches across a whole lifetime, encompassing many major events and political upheaval. It is a tale, or several tales, of love that

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continues to blossom despite the hideousness and depravity of war. Like the red poppy that defiantly bloomed on the battlefields in Northern France and Belgium in WWI, the love that develops between Edward, Ming Ling and Chen Mu cannot be thwarted.

Lauren Dougherty